

State Officials Break Ground On Expansion Of Middletown Veterans Cemetery

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

George Eisenbach, director of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' cemetery grants program, said the trend in Connecticut is matched nationwide. According to the state Department of Veterans Affairs, more than 12,000 veterans and their dependents are buried in its three cemeteries.

FULL TEXT

An expansion of the State Veterans Cemetery that officials say is needed to keep up with an increasing pace of burials has begun.

More than 7,000 veterans are buried at the cemetery and there will be an additional 2,000 burial plots on eight acres once the \$5.45 million expansion is done, acting Commissioner of Veterans Affairs Thomas Saadi said after a groundbreaking ceremony. Saadi said there is a tremendous need for the expansion.

"In the past several years we have seen a significant increase in our annual burials here, we realized we had to look toward expanding this cemetery," Saadi said.

He said the number of burials in the state veterans cemeteries was about 300 a year a decade ago and is now at 600. Much of that increase is driven by the death of World War II veterans, most of whom are in their early or mid-90s, he said.

"The section of this cemetery for Jewish veterans had 10 or 12 people buried in it 15 years ago, now it's full. This is what is happening to our veterans community," said Marty Pear, an Air Force veteran of the Korean war from Middletown who is active in the Jewish War Veterans and other veterans groups. "I was worried we would run out of grave plots here."

George Eisenbach, director of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' cemetery grants program, said the trend in Connecticut is matched nationwide.

Lt. Gov. Nancy Wyman called the cemetery a sacred place.

"The men and women buried here are heroes who made tremendous sacrifices to serve Connecticut and the nation," Wyman said. "These improvements are part of our overall commitment to our veterans and their families." A federal grant is funding the expansion. Saadi said the hope is that the additional burial spaces will be enough to last another 10 years.

The federal government has given the state another \$3.17 million to improve existing headstones in the cemetery. Saadi said the rows of headstones would be realigned to improve the appearance of the cemetery.

Saadi said planning for the two projects began more than a year ago. Work on both began this month and the expansion is expected to be finished a year from now. The other project should be done by February 2020, officials said on Tuesday.

According to the state Department of Veterans Affairs, more than 12,000 veterans and their dependents are buried in its three cemeteries. In addition to the one in Middletown, the others are in Rocky Hill and Darien. The cemetery in Darien is closed for burials.

Credit: Ken Byron

DETAILS

Subject:	Veterans; Cemeteries
Location:	Connecticut
Company / organization:	Name: Department of Veterans Affairs; NAICS: 923140
Publication title:	Hartford Courant (Online); Hartford
Publication year:	2017
Publication date:	Dec 19, 2017
Publisher:	Tribune Publishing Company, LLC
Place of publication:	Hartford
Country of publication:	United States, Hartford
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States
Source type:	Blog, Podcast, or Website
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News
ProQuest document ID:	1978711589
Document URL:	https://www.proquest.com/hartfordcourant/blogs-podcasts-websites/state-officials-break-ground-on-expansion/docview/1978711589/sem-2?accountid=40623
Copyright:	Copyright Tribune Interactive, LLC Dec 19, 2017
Last updated:	2017-12-20
Database:	Hartford Courant

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